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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1802  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2254  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2560  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000653

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/10/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [UNSC](#) [EAIR](#) [SA](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUSTICE MINISTER RIZK WANTS TO MAINTAIN  
STATUS QUO

REF: A. BEIRUT 618

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 635

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 648

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Justice Minister Rizk told the Charge on May 11 that he had not anticipated such a strong reaction from Hizballah to the Cabinet's May 5 decisions to transfer the head of airport security and to declare Hizballah's fiber optics network illegal. Rizk criticized the relationship between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hizballah, noting its coordination in the positional takeovers of Future Movement party offices and media stations. Rizk believes that the Arab League could be a neutral host of the National Dialogue. Hizballah lost legitimacy, according to Rizk, by using its arms internally and by attacking state institutions, referring to the airport road. End summary.

SURPRISED AT OPPOSITION'S  
REACTIONS TO CABINET DECISIONS

[1](#)2. (C) The Charge, accompanied by Defense Attache and PolOff, visited Justice Minister Rizk at 1400 local time on May 11. A distraught Rizk said that he had not anticipated the opposition's reactions to the Cabinet's decisions to transfer the head of airport security Wafiq Shucair and declare Hizballah's fiber optics network illegal (Ref A). Rizk noted that he had advised the cabinet members to consult with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman on Shucair's case prior to making a decision.

[1](#)3. (C) However, Rizk relayed, Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh and Defense Minister Elias Murr were pushing for a Cabinet decision on the discovery of Hizballah-installed surveillance cameras at the airport. Rizk mentioned that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora had not been in favor of transferring Shucair and faulted the environment (Hizballah is everywhere around the airport, Rizk explained), not the individual, for enabling the camera placement. Rizk said he argued with Minister of Education Khaled Qabbani, who, as a judge, preferred to refer the fiber optics network issue to the Special Prosecutor.

14. (C) Rizk stated, "I didn't think our decisions were such a big deal. No one predicted how Hizballah was going to react, he continued. He added that, as the Defense Minister, Murr should have had some intelligence that Hizballah would respond in this manner. Further, Rizk argued, Hizballah has many informants in the government, even in the Grand Serail. (Note: Rizk was implying that someone informed Hizballah about the letter that Siniora sent to the UN declaring Hizballah's fiber optics network illegal. End note.) We were unprepared, Rizk remarked. "Maybe it isn't a coup d'etat, but it sure smells like one," he asserted.

#### ANALYSIS OF SLEIMAN

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15. (C) Rizk suggested that the U.S. provide "software, not hardware" to the LAF; "The army won't benefit from more equipment," he argued. "The LAF stands to lose 70 percent of its officers -- the Sunnis, Christians, and Druze -- but Sleiman is not talking about this," Rizk said. He added that he believes Sleiman is happy in his current role. Rizk provided his assessment, "Sleiman was first Syria's candidate, then he shifted, thanks to Elias Murr. Then he performed in a reasonable manner in Nahr al-Barid, though he was unenthusiastic about taking action at the outset. Next Sleiman started to be perceived as more reasonable, more March 14, which caused him to lose support from his original protectors. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah praised Sleiman so excessively in his May 8 speech that he effectively disqualified him." Rizk wondered what/who prompted Sleiman to request the government to officially withdraw its controversial decisions.

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16. (C) While commenting that he thought Siniora was "too tough" on Sleiman, Rizk criticized Sleiman for asking Siniora to do things he knew he couldn't do, referring to Sleiman's letter (septel) requesting the Cabinet cancel its decisions.

17. (C) Rizk surmised that Hizballah has been showing restraint to support Sleiman. He said he believed that the LAF was involved in all of the Future Movement media and party office takeovers on May 9 (Ref B). He reasoned, "Maybe the LAF was going further than Hizballah because it was the army that was ordering the Future supporters to leave their offices." Rizk said it was a "stupid move" to burn the Future offices, suggesting that it was "so stupid that maybe it was done by Syrian intelligence to embarrass Hizballah."

#### ARAB LEAGUE AS POTENTIAL "NEUTRAL ELEMENT"

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18. (C) Rizk believed it is naive to expect the Arab League to offer anything practical on Lebanon. At a minimum, he acknowledged, the Arab League can provide a neutral element for a National Dialogue, referring to Siniora's suggestion in his May 10 televised address (Ref C). Rizk said that there is speculation that the National Dialogue could take place in Cairo.

19. (C) In the long-term, Rizk said, he sees only losses for both the opposition and the majority. Hizballah is losing its "legitimacy" to possess weapons for the purposes of resistance, he stated. Further, he added, Hizballah lost credibility by attacking state institutions, noting that the airport road technically belongs to the state. Rizk said that there remains a possibility to benefit from this situation, explaining, "This crisis cannot be seen as local. The Siniora government and the U.S. previously had a strong position in Lebanon. The balance has now been altered." He asked, "Can the U.S. or Saad Hariri accept this loss?"

#### PREFERENCE FOR STATUS QUO

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¶10. (C) Rizk remarked that he thought everyone was accepting of the status quo and political vacuum (before the events starting May 7). Now, he said he does not believe the situation is irreversible. "If we elect Sleiman as president, he and his newly formed cabinet will be under Hizballah's influence. Even the new electoral law would be as Hizballah directs it." Instead, he argued, we should extend the status quo for a while. He advocated that no action be taken to open the road to Beirut International Airport, and the government should seek out alternatives, such as the Rene Mouawad/Kleyate airport in northern Lebanon and/or a helicopter transport to Cyprus.

¶11. (C) Rizk expressed his displeasure with Minister of Transport and Public Works Mohammed Safadi, noting that he did not stay for the duration of this week's ten-hour Cabinet meeting (Ref A). Rizk further slammed Safadi, who oversees the airports, for publicly declaring on May 10 that the Rene Mouawad/Kleyate airport in northern Lebanon was inoperable, arguing that the airport is indeed operable for commercial aircraft. (Note: Safadi's private company was briefly interested in taking over the airport after a USG-funded TDA feasibility study had been completed. End note.) Rizk remarked that it was "stupid" for Lebanon to only have one airport for commercial aircraft use, advocating that there be three airports. Rizk continued, "We don't want to cede BIA, but we should at least open the airport in the north for the time being." He also believes that there should be helicopter service to Cyprus.

COMMENT

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¶12. (C) Even before finishing his second slug of 12 year-old Johnnie Walker Black, Rizk displayed a measured sense of calm and subdued satisfaction that was perhaps not surprising. Earlier in the day, Defense Minister Elias Murr told he suspected Rizk still harbors presidential ambitions. In

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attempting to put himself above the fray, Rizk was not overly critical of anyone, suggesting he wanted to appear to us as someone who could work with all sides. End comment.  
SISON